

No. 37

September 20, 1969

"FACING THE DAY OF CHRIST JESUS"

Rev. Masahisa Suzuki died Monday, July 14, following the illness reported in the special June 23 issue of the Kyodan News Letter. Suzuki, who was 56 years old, had been moderator of the Kyodan since 1966 and was in his second term. For 23 years he was pastor of Nishi-Katamachi Church in Tokyo. Rev. Kiyoshi Ii, speaking at the funeral service held at Joshi Gakuin July 19, said of Suzuki, "His life can best be described in terms of Prophet, Teacher, and Witness." Enclosed with this issue is a transcript of one of the late moderator's recent messages.

KIYOSHI II BECOMES KYODAN MODERATOR

Vice Moderator Kiyoshi Ii assumed the leadership of the Kyodan upon the death of Rev. Masahisa Suzuki, as provided for in the Kyodan Constitution. Ii served two terms as secretary of the Kyodan before his election to the vice moderatorship in 1966 and his re-election in 1968. He is pastor of Reinanzaka Church, Tokyo.

On Sept. 8, the standing committee elected Rev. Takeshi Takasaki as new vice moderator. Takasaki is president of Tokyo Union Theological Seminary and a noted authority in Christian education as well as a strong supporter of the Kyodan platform of Self-Reliance, Consolidation and Advance.

1,000 PASTORS ENJOY NO-AGENDA FELLOWSHIP MEETING

Fellowship was the goal and fellowship the achievement of the National Pastors' Meeting held Sept. 9-11 at Kowakien Hotel, Hakone. There were no lectures, and conversation and discussion overflowed from the conference rooms into the bath, onto the verandahs, along garden paths as nearly 1,000 pastors from urban concentrations, suburban dispersions and remote preaching points got together to talk about "whatever was on their minds."

Although no topics were specified, certain issues came up wherever groups of pastors gathered: the reversion of Okinawa to Japan / Prime Minister Sato's visit to the United States this fall / Expo '70, the international exposition to be held in Osaka in 1970 / the Christian Pavilion at Expo '70 / the all-night bargaining session between the Kyodan standing executive committee and Expo '70 opponents the night of Sept. 1.

Interspersed were evenings of entertainment--contemporary plays by Christian dramatists Rinzo Shiina and Kaname Takado and ventriloquy by Rev. Noda and Kenchan, but these too were quickly drawn into the vortex of immediate social issues.

Young pastors attended as well as men renewing acquaintances of long years' standing. A loosely-knit pastors' association drew up plans for the meeting.

EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY TO CONSIDER EXPO '70 PROBLEM

At its Sept. 11 meeting, the standing committee of the Kyodan voted to convene an extraordinary General Assembly to reconsider the Kyodan's participation in the Christian Pavilion at Expo '70. The issue has been pressed by several district assemblies as well as by an aggressive group of young seminary students, pastors and laymen, and is felt to be deeply related to the understanding of what the mission of the church is, and to the Confession of War Responsibility.

Masahisa Suzuki's

REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFESSION OF WAR RESPONSIBILITY

June, 1969

Shortly before his death, Mr. Suzuki recorded two messages for members of the Nishi-Katamachi Church, Tokyo, and for pastors and members of the United Church. In the message, "Facing the Day of Christ Jesus," as he faces his own imminent death, he shares Paul's experience, recorded in Philippians, saying, "Tomorrow became truly shining ahead, transcending a mere return to the busy round of this life, transcending death itself; and when this tomorrow became a reality, today became something living before my very eyes as never before."

The second message is Mr. Suzuki's reflections on the personal, Biblical and theological meanings of the Confession of War Responsibility, issued over his name in 1967.

Both of Mr. Suzuki's messages have been printed in Japanese and English, and copies are available upon request to the Kyodan News Letter. Below is the second message, in slightly abridged form.

+

Many letters I have received lately have said, in effect, "I am praying that, in accordance with the Lord's will, a miracle will occur and restore your health." But when I think about this, it gives me a very desolate feeling for the implication is that, if the Lord's will prevails, my illness will be cured, but if his will cannot prevail to the point of accomplishing a miracle on my behalf, and if I should die, my death will be mainly the result of a chance encounter with a virulent cancer that proved too strong. What a desolate thing it would be to die in this way! To say, "whether we live or whether we die, it is according to the Lord," means to me that even leaving this world is in accordance with the unfathomable will of God. What I am going to say may be regarded by some people as outright nonsense, by others as complacency, conceit, or utter delusion, but it is something I have thought about a great deal. At the very least, I should like this to be true of my own death: that the Lord, in his profound mercy, should see fit to use it.

According to the doctor, my cancer first became active about two years ago, although its origin was perhaps earlier. When I suddenly became exhausted upon my return from Okinawa this April, it had already spread to the liver and was beyond treatment. Yet when I heard this explanation, a certain satisfaction sprang up in my heart, for these two years were the period during which, against the background of the long years of labour and the continuing relationship with the Nishi-Katamachi Church, my work reached a kind of climax, as moderator of the Kyodan--work into which I poured all the strength I had. All that this entails can be summed up under the Kyodan's Declaration of Responsibility in connection with World War II. This is, furthermore, a declaration that relates to the present and to the future, as well as to the past.

In Hebrews you will find the statement that it is by blood that all men are purified. This is not merely a matter of words. The words must be accompanied by deeds. And it is not merely a matter of deeds, for the deeds must, in turn, be backed by blood, by one's very life. Usually we stop with words, saying that deeds are difficult; yet there is a sense in which deeds are easy. To do something that can be seen is easy. But to throw one's life away for something is very hard.

In the Book of Revelation is an expression that I did not understand for a long time. The saints in Christ are saying various things to the Lord, but they are told that they must wait until God makes replete the blood of the martyrs. I now understand what this means. It means that when a Christian prays to God, his prayer must be backed not only by his deeds but by his blood, by his very life. At that time, for the first time, his prayer is heard by God and becomes a driving force that works in the world with power. This is true whether we recall the lives of the great saints up to the present age, or of Paul or the other apostles or the prophets or the Lord Jesus Christ or the host of people in the history of the church.

Giving Living Form to the Confession

Two years ago when we issued the Declaration of War Responsibility, many people were in agreement, but there were also many who mocked it and opposed it, saying, "It's easy enough just to say these things," or "It's absolutely ridiculous." But for my part, ever since that day, I have had remarkable peace of mind about it, and I have not shifted at all from that statement. There was also a remarkable sense of power and confidence in my heart that we would put it into effect.

From that time on everything that has been done, as those connected with the Kyodan know, is related directly or indirectly to the sins committed by the Kyodan in World War II, its Confession of them, and its change in the direction of becoming a church that takes increasing responsibility and initiative toward this country, toward society and toward the world.

Needless to say, this will become the cornerstone of the Kyodan as it turns toward the '70s. To my way of thinking, our situation is one in which the word has been spoken and the action taken. But the real question is whether we have backed this up with our lifeblood.

Our church acted in a way that was blameworthy, both toward our country and toward society, but it has repented and, in the mercy of God, asked the forgiveness of its neighbours. As we face the '70s, is this not the very time for us to stand on our feet and, for the first time, move forward in the power of speaking the word, performing the deed, and backing this up with our lives?

This is not something for just one or two persons to do; undoubtedly it is something that many of the brothers and sisters who belong to the Kyodan can do. Yet, in the present circumstances, rather than asking by whom it should be done--if we can say that the Lord himself will use one of us, sinful and weak though we are, to accomplish this--should it not be, in the light of the foregoing meaning, that he would fittingly choose the one who represents the Kyodan; namely, the moderator--in fact, the present moderator? Especially would he not appropriately choose the person responsible for the promulgation of the Confession? I have really

sought forgiveness before God and my neighbours and now can move ahead with a fresh spirit, not simply hurling criticisms at the government for the way it compromised in the past, on the basis that there is a difference between the war period and now.

My cancer began about the time the Confession was getting under way. Thinking back over it, I cannot say there were no discernible symptoms...but I felt instinctively that if I went to see the doctor, that would be the end and that if I were hospitalized, this issue would be left in suspension....

Avoiding minor activities, I concentrated on major issues....Our responsibility in connection with the war must be born in a variety of ways. One of these, having political, social and ecclesiastical implications, was the concrete step of uniting with the Okinawan church and helping to bear its burdens. Another way is, in remembrance of the atomic bomb and the war, to transcend ideologies and work for the protection of human life. In this lies the role of Christianity today. I felt this with regard to construction of the Home for Elderly A-Bomb Victims in Hiroshima and was deeply in earnest about it.

After I finally went to bed from exhaustion, I thought about many things: why must I leave the world in this unexpected way, leaving behind my aged mother and other members of my family? It was an inscrutable problem. Yet I feel it similar to the situation when I received my draft summons in 1944 and suddenly had to leave my mother, my other family members, and my church members and head for the front. Fortunately or unfortunately, since I had just had stomach surgery, I was ordered home the same day. Others who were called up with me went off to the front. From what I heard, most of them went down on a ship en route to the Philippines; the rest went to other places and were killed.

"I was indeed one of the war generation...."

Now as I reflect upon this, the thing that impresses me is that I was indeed one of the war generation. I always carry in my heart the memory of that war. Even now when I hear a war song, I shed tears. It's not a feeling of nostalgia over the war; it is grief over the human beings destroyed and lost in that way. The friends who died in the war, and the many memories of them, never leave my mind.

More than the political question of whether the U.S. was right and Japan wrong in the Pacific War, what I regretted, and felt inexcusable, during and after the war, is the fact that as human beings we were unable to maintain a civilization and culture that protected human beings; or, rather than not being able to, we did not make an all-out effort to do so, and I feel that I myself did not fully exert my energies toward this end, for which I am very sorry.

However, at least the Kyodan has been able to express its penitence for these matters, and for this I am thankful to God. Moreover, with this as a foundation, through the efforts of many fellow Christians over the past two years, the church has experienced renewal. Furthermore, in accordance with the Biblical word that, without the shedding of blood, there is no cleansing, no fulfillment, the privilege has been granted to me, unknowingly, to make restitution with my life. Even if this is not so, I would like to believe it. By thinking this I can truly say "Yes" to my imminent death and leave this world in peace.

If you feel that I am talking too "big," please forgive me. Neither I nor my friends who died in the war are persons who felt especially big. Those young men, who seemed like younger brothers to me, sorrowing, suffering and starving as they crawled through the mud amid the flying bullets, grasping at the roots of the grass, slipped away from this world. Yet the Lord, taking them by the hand, and forgiving their sins, took them into his kingdom and, throughout their lives, full of imperfections as they were, I truly believe that he was nurturing the truth that came forth from the seed implanted by his own Gospel.

I for my part did not die in the war, and I cannot compare my sufferings to the sufferings of those who died; yet it is as though I am crawling forward, a day at a time, through the pain of this cancer and my tears. And yet I like to think that when the time comes for me to fall and to crawl, clutching at the roots of the grass, God, in his great mercy, will stretch out his hand, forgive my sins and invite me into his kingdom, and in this way make this life, which is ending so unexpectedly, something that has not been lived in vain.

What I should like is for you all to think with me that God has done what is best. Above all my desire is that the United Church of Christ in Japan should not merely have proclaimed a message that supported the Pacific War and then, when times changed, issued a different message, taking new positions opportunistically, and speaking out freely only when speaking out was permissible. I should like to think that now we are making a fresh start and, on this basis, advancing into the 1970s. If we do this, I too shall be participating in what the church militant, for which I have longed, is doing.

There is one last word I would add. Through the war I really grieved for Japan, for ~~Society~~ and for the church set in the midst of it all. Whenever I saw younger pastors and laymen, who were like younger brothers to me, I always said, "I shall die in the midst of this sorrow, but you, please, must live in a new and a new church."

When, at the end of the war, they had died, and I remained alive, how bewildering it was! "Why did you die before me?" I kept murmuring daily in my heart. Then I adopted a different attitude and I said, "But what you intended to do and couldn't, I will now carry out." Repeating this in my heart, I would preach each Sunday with their photographs at one side of the pulpit.

Now, though it may be an odd thing to say, my death may, after all, be like a war death, if looked at from a deep and broad standpoint. I have only this feeling--that there was one thing I wanted to say but couldn't before they died: I couldn't say, in an official capacity, "Japan made a mistake; the church made a mistake; I ask the forgiveness of God and our neighbours and pray that everything will become new, that the church will become new, that a new society will be created. Through my being left alive for these twenty or more years and saying officially what they, or at least the Christians among them, really couldn't say, I have after all taken up their task. I feel that in so doing I have been enabled by God to carry a certain task through to its conclusion.